Milton, John Il penseroso

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# MILTON

IL PENSEROSO

EDITED, WITH NOTES

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OLIVER ELTON, B.A.

LATE SCHOLAR OF CORPUS CHRISTI COLLEGE, OXFORD
FOTURER IN ENGLISH LITERATURE AT THE OWENS COLLEGE, MANCHESTER

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LIKE the twin-poem L'Allegro, Il Penseroso was written in the early summer, if not in the spring, of Milton's genius, amid the country scenes which it presents. It consists of a series of dissolving views which pass before the poet's inward eye, and are in tune with his self-appointed mood of melancholy. But it is not the melancholy of an old blind poet,

'On evil days now fallen, and evil tongues:'

it is a scholarly, warm, contented melancholy, which is so responsive to beautiful images from without, and so richly stored inwardly with classic and heroic allusion, that it is too full to be sad: a melancholy, in fact, which, just like the mirth of the Allegro, is more a literary mood which the poet prescribes upon himself than any profound temper of his own. It is the product rather of a congenial exercise than of an urgent inspiration.

Milton's style, like his character, is from the first essentially noble. But, in these early poems, the nobility is rather that of grace than of power. The humanist, the lover and observer of nature, and the sure-handed craftsman, are already here; but the minstrel of freedom and righteousness, the disputant, the Puritan, are latent. The years of civil stress and combat which were to kindle Milton's imagination to its glowing-point, and to inspire his strongest music, yet lay before him. Hell and its king were still unimagined.

The fascination of these two poems, therefore, lies in the perfection with which the poet keeps within the limits he has laid upon his design. The atmosphere is exactly the same throughout; not a word is too common or too sublime. Nature is seen, not face to face, nor yet again exactly 'through the spectacles of books,' but through a film of exquisite phrase—phrase so exquisite that it at times almost obscures the object,—'dark

with excessive light.'

The two poems are most probably earlier than Comus and Lycidas, though belonging to the same group. We do not know their exact date: but from the order of printing in the edition of 1645, and from evidence of tone and workmanship, it is likely that Milton wrote them before 1634. During the years 1632 to 1638 Milton lived with his father at Horton, in Buckinghamshire, near Windsor. It is hopeless to try to identify more than the general aspect of the scenery; and, if we are right in our interpretation of 'the wide-watered shore,' the poet does not tie himself down to the gracious rolling country where he stands, but takes wings of thought for the great sea.

### IL PENSEROSO.

Hence, vain deluding Joys,	
The brood of Folly without father bred!	
How little you bested,	
Or fill the fixed mind with all your toys!	
Dwell in some idle brain,	
And fancies fond with gaudy shapes possess,	
As thick and numberless	
As the gay motes that people the sunbeams,	
Or likest hovering dreams,	
The fickle pensioners of Morpheus' train.	10
But hail thou Goddess, sage and holy,	
Hail divinest Melancholy,	
Whose saintly visage is too bright	
To hit the sense of human sight;	
And therefore to our weaker view	15
O'erlaid with black, staid Wisdom's hue;	
Black, but such as in esteem	
Prince Memnon's sister might beseem,	
Or that starred Ethiope queen that strove	
To set her beauty's praise above	20
The Sea-Nymphs, and their powers offended.	
Yet thou art higher far descended;	

Thee bright-haired Vesta long of yore To solitary Saturn bore; His daughter she (in Saturn's reign, 25 Such mixture was not held a stain); Oft in glimmering bowers and glades He met her, and in secret shades Of woody Ida's inmost grove, While yet there was no fear of Jove. 30 Come pensive Nun, devout and pure, Sober, stedfast, and demure, All in a robe of darkest grain. Flowing with majestic train, And sable stole of cypress lawn, 35 Over thy decent shoulders drawn. Come, but keep thy wonted state, With even step, and musing gait, And looks commercing with the skies, Thy rapt soul sitting in thine eyes: 40 There, held in holy passion still, Forget thyself to marble, till With a sad leaden downward cast Thou fix them on the earth as fast. And join with thee calm Peace and Quiet, 45 Spare Fast, that oft with gods doth diet, And hears the Muses in a ring, Ave round about Jove's altar sing; And add to these retired Leisure, That in trim gardens takes his pleasure; 50 But first, and chiefest, with thee bring, Him that you soars on golden wing, Guiding the fiery-wheeled throne, The cherub Contemplation;

And the mute Silence hist along,	55
'Less Philomel will deign a song,	
In her sweetest, saddest plight,	
Smoothing the rugged brow of Night,	
While Cynthia checks her dragon yoke,	
Gently o'er the accustomed oak:	60
Sweet bird, that shunn'st the noise of folly,	
Most musical, most melancholy!	
Thee, chauntress, oft the woods among,	
I woo to hear thy even-song;	
And, missing thee, I walk unseen	65
On the dry smooth-shaven green,	
To behold the wandering Moon,	
Riding near her highest noon,	
Like one that had been led astray	
Through the Heaven's wide pathless way,	70
And oft, as if her head she bowed,	
Stooping through a fleecy cloud.	
Oft, on a plat of rising ground,	
I hear the far-off curfeu sound,	
Over some wide-watered shore,	75
Swinging slow with sullen roar;	
Or, if the air will not permit,	
Some still removed place will fit,	
Where glowing embers through the room	
Teach light to counterfeit a gloom,	80
Far from all resort of mirth,	
Save the cricket on the hearth,	
Or the bellman's drowsy charm,	
To bless the doors from nightly harm.	
Or let my lamp at midnight hour	85
Be seen in some high lonely tower,	

Where I may oft out-watch the Bear With thrice-great Hermes; or unsphere The spirit of Plato to unfold What worlds, or what vast regions hold 90 The immortal mind that hath forsook Her mansion in this fleshly nook; And of those dæmons that are found In fire, air, flood, or under ground, Whose power hath a true consent 95 With planet, or with element. Sometime let gorgeous Tragedy In sceptered pall come sweeping by, Presenting Thebes, or Pelops' line, Or the tale of Troy divine, 100 Or what (though rare) of later age, Ennobled hath the buskined stage. But, O sad Virgin! that thy power Might raise Musæus from his bower, Or bid the soul of Orpheus sing 105 Such notes as, warbled to the string, Drew iron tears down Pluto's cheek, And made Hell grant what Love did seek. Or call up him that left half told The story of Cambuscan bold, 110 Of Camball, and of Algarsife, And who had Canace to wife, That owned the virtuous ring and glass, And of the wondrous horse of brass On which the Tartar king did ride; 115 And if aught else great bards beside In sage and solemn tunes have sung,

Of turneys, and of trophies hung,

Of forests, and enchantments drear, Where more is meant than meets the ear. 120 Thus, Night, oft see me in thy pale career, Till civil-suited Morn appear; Not tricked and frounced, as she was wont With the Attic boy to hunt, But kercheft in a comely cloud, 125 While rocking winds are piping loud; Or ushered with a shower still, When the gust hath blown his fill, Ending on the rustling leaves, With minute drops from off the eaves. 130 And when the sun begins to fling His flaring beams, me, Goddess, bring To arched walks of twilight groves, And shadows brown, that Sylvan loves, Of pine, or monumental oak, 135 Where the rude axe with heaved stroke Was never heard, the nymphs to daunt, Or fright them from their hallowed haunt. There in close covert, by some brook Where no profaner eye may look, 140 Hide me from day's garish eye; While the bee with honied thigh, That at her flowery work doth sing, And the waters murmuring With such consort as they keep, 145 Entice the dewy-feathered Sleep; And let some strange mysterious dream Wave at his wings in airy stream Of lively portraiture displayed, Softly on my eyelids laid. 150

And as I wake, sweet music breathe Above, about, or underneath, Sent by some spirit to mortals good, Or the unseen Genius of the wood. But let my due feet never fail 155 To walk the studious cloister's pale, And love the high embowed roof, With antique pillars massy-proof, And storied windows richly dight, Casting a dim religious light. 160 There let the pealing organ blow To the full voiced quire below, In service high, and anthems clear, As may with sweetness, through mine ear, Dissolve me into ecstasies. 165 And bring all Heaven before mine eyes. And may at last my weary age Find out the peaceful hermitage. The hairy gown and mossy cell, Where I may sit, and rightly spell 170 Of every star that Heaven doth shew, And every herb that sips the dew: Till old experience do attain To something like prophetic strain. These pleasures, Melancholy, give,

And I with thee will choose to live.

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#### NOTES.

THE editions of Keightley and Masson have been most useful in compiling the following notes. Acknowledgment is also due to the valuable notes of Mr. R. C. Browne, in his edition of Milton's Poems: to most of the quotations from him his initials are appended.

1. I. Notice the parallelism of this poem with L'Allegro in the opening ten lines, in the succeeding invocation, in the closing couplet, and in many minute points. (See Introduction to L'Allegro in this edition.)

The word Penseroso was the contemporary form of mod. Ital.

Pensieroso, 'thoughtful, pensive.'

1. 2. Folly without father: sheer, unmixed Folly.

1. 3. bested: help. See Glossary.

1. 4. toys: trivial, vain gauds.

1.6. fancies fond: the imaginations of the foolish. Cp. Lycidas 56, 'Ay me, I fondly dream.'

1. 7. 'As thik as motes in the sonne-beem.' (Chaucer, Wife of

Bath's T., 6450.)

1. 10. pensioners: retainers. Queen Elizabeth had for her guard a select band of tall and handsome gentlemen, called Pensioners. Cp. Mrs. Quickly's climax, 'earls, nay, which is more, pensioners.' (Merry Wives, ii. 2. 79, Globe edition, to which all Shaksperian quotations here refer.) [R. C. B.]

l. 11. The irregular ode-like metre ends, and the main metre of the poem begins. It is the familiar rhymed eight-syllabled line, varied and set off with Milton's own skill by lines of seven syllables of the type of ll. 17, 32, &c., where the stress is reversed. Milton uses the same combination in some of the songs in Comus, but afterwards deserted it for the greater harmonies of the ten-syllabled blank line. Lycidas, with its irregularly rhymed ten-syllabled lines, marks the transition between the two schemes: that is, if the usual view be correct, that our two poems were written towards the beginning, as Lycidas was written towards the end, of the years spent in Buckinghamshire.

l. 14. To hit: to meet, touch. Cp. Antony and Cleopatra, ii. 2.
217:—
'From the barge

A strange invisible perfume hits the sense.' [R. C. B.]

1. 17. esteem: repute, Lat. opinio.

l. 18. Memnon, the king of Ethiopia, slain by Achilles, was black but comely, and his sister may have been so likewise.

l. 18. beseem: befit as a rival.

1. 19. starred. Milton spells starr'd, and in general marks the contraction when he wishes the word so pronounced. Except in a few special words it has seemed best to modernise the spelling throughout. The ear easily learns when to sound the contraction.

Cassiope, wife of Cepheus, king of Ethiopia, offended the Nereids in the way described. They sent a flood and a sea-monster upon Ethiopia, and would only be appeased by the sacrifice of Andromeda to the creature. The delivery of Andromeda by Perseus is recorded in Kingsley's noble hexameters on 'Andromeda.' In the end both Cassiope and Andromeda were 'starred,' or set among the constellations.

1. 23. Vesta is the Hearth-goddess, and Saturn the god of 'solitary' thought and brooding: their child is Melancholy, born in forests in the golden Saturnian age: 'the first age, when there was no summer nor winter, spring nor autumn, but all after one air and season.' (Bacon, Advancement of Learning, ii.)

1. 26. mixture : marriage union.

1. 32. demure: solemn, without the suggestions of archness and primness which we find in the word.

#### 'The drums

Demurely wake the sleepers.'

(Antony and Cleopatra, iv. 9. 31.) [R. C. B.]

1. 33. grain: dark or purple colour, though originally the word referred to texture. See Glossary.

1. 35. stole: veil or hood. See Glossary. cypress: black crape. See Glossary.

1. 36. decent implies both comeliness and sedateness.

1. 37. Note the effect of the sudden change of stress in the rhythm. 'To keep state' was a familiar phrase taken from the canopy of state under which the throne was placed. 'This chair shall be my state,' says Falstaff (I Henry IV. ii. 4. 416). So too in Macbeth, iii. 4. 5, Macbeth 'mingles with society,' while Lady Macbeth 'keeps her state,' staying on the dais.

1. 40. rapt: enraptured into dreams. Macbeth, i. 3. 142, 'Look, how our partner's rapt.'

1. 41. still is an adjective, 'tranquil,' not an adverb ('always').

1. 42. So in the lines on Shakspere:-

'Then thou, our fancy of itself bereaving, Dost make us marble with too much conceiving.'

1. 44. as fast: as before they were bent on heaven.

l. 46. Temperate lightness of diet sets the mind free from grossness and wakens it to poetry and high themes.

11. 52-54. A daring use of the vision in Ezekiel, chap. x. Milton ventures to *name* one of the Cherubs that there guide the fiery wheelings of the throne. (Professor Masson.)

1. 55. hist along. See Glossary.

1. 59. Cynthia, or the Moon, whom Milton figures as drawn, like Demeter of old, by dragons, is 'love-charmed to listen' to the nightingale, and reins in her car over 'the accustomed oak.'

1. 66. A college- or bowling-green is meant. Milton, like Bacon and

Marvell, loved a garden.

1. 67. 'Swifter than the wandering moon' (Midsummer Night's Dream, iv. 1. 103), is one of the echoes of Shakspere's lyrics which we find in Milton: Horace has 'vaga luna.'

1. 69. Sir Philip Sidney has a beautiful sonnet beginning,

'With how sad steps, O Moon, thou climbst the skies! How silently! And with how sad a face!' [R. C. B.]

1. 73. plat: plateau. It is impossible and useless, in the following lines, to decide how far the poet represents himself as seeing and walking among the scenes described, and how far as imagining them. There is no dividing line: the views dissolve into one another as the spectator dreams: and insensibly the description of an evening walk melts into the mental vision of Plato and of 'gorgeous Tragedy.'

1. 75. Professor Masson's reasons for taking the wide-watered shore as the shore of the sea rather than of a lake or flood seem very strong. Such is the natural meaning of the words: and there is no reason why the poet's mind should not fly off to the sea. 'Shore is always with Milton the shore of a sea or some large piece of water that cannot be all seen round at once.' It is not so easy to agree with the Professor when he suggests that line 76 refers 'to the shore itself with the swinging boom of its waves': it is better to admit with him that the 'other construction' (referring the words, as is natural, to the bell) 'is perhaps the less forced.' 'Sullen' is a regular word in Shakspere for a passing-bell.

1. 78. removed is 'sequestered and undisturbed' rather than merely 'remote.'

1. 80. Faerie Queene, i. 1. 14, 'A little glooming light, much like a shade.'

1. 83. The charm is the chant (carmen) of the watchman as he went round with his bell: Stow says that he 'gave warning of fire and candle and to help the poor and pray for the dead.' Todd well quotes Herrick's beautiful poem, The Bellman:-

> 'From noise of scare-fires rest ye free, From murder, Benedicite! From all mischances that may fright Your pleasing slumbers in the night, Mercy secure ye all, and keep The goblin from ye, while ye sleep.'

1. 87. The watcher sits up till daybreak, for the Bear never sets.

1. 88. thrice-great Hermes was a mythical king and philosopher of Egypt, named Thot, to whom the Neo-Platonists ascribed the name and universal wisdom of the Greek Hermes. Bacon speaks (Advancement of Learning, i. ad init.) of the 'triplicity which in great veneration was ascribed to the ancient Hermes; the power and fortune of a king, the knowledge and illumination of a priest, and the learning and universality of a philosopher.' [Quotation from R. C. B.]

unsphere: to draw him down from the stars and make him reveal his secret: to 'pluck out the heart of his mystery,' above all in the matter of immortality, by reading and interpreting his Phaedo.

1. 93. And of: and tell of, tell being understood from 'unfold' above. The best comment on this passage is found in Paradise Regained, ii. 121-4:-

> 'Princes, Heaven's ancient Sons, Ethereal Thrones-Demonian Spirits now, from the element Each of his reign allotted, rightlier called Powers of Fire, Air, Water, and Earth beneath.'

This assignation of the demons to the four elements is a piece of Neo-Platonism, and their identification with the fallen spirits is a graft of mediaeval Christianity upon it.

1. 95. consent is harmony. Each demon's power is appropriate to, assorted with, his element, fire, air, &c.

1. 97. The subjects of Attic tragedy are taken from the misfortunes of royal and heroic personages, which afforded 'stateliest and most regal argument,' as Milton says in his Tractate of Education.

1. 98. The pall is Lat. palla, the outer garment, usually of wool or

cloth, often richly dyed or embroidered.

1. 99. Presenting is the regular word for performing on the stage.

Thebes was made by Aeschylus the scene of his Seven against Thebes, by Sophocles of his Oedipus Tyrannus and Antigone, and by Euripides of his Bacchae. [R. C. B.]

Pelops' line. The allusion is to the trilogy of Aeschylus on the murder of Agamemnon and its nemesis. Agamemnon was a descendant of Pelops, king of Pisa in Elis, who gave his name to the Peloponnesus.

l. 100. Troy divine. See the Ajax and Philoctetes of Sophocles, the Hecuba and Andromache of Euripides.

1. 101. though rare. What a strange phrase to use just after the great dramatic outburst of the times of Elizabeth! Probably the key is to be found in the word 'ennobled': the fastidious Milton would only allow an 'ennobling' effect to Shakspere himself (or to Marlowe), and was repelled by the unequal and violent work (as he may have thought it) of writers like Webster, so unlike the austerity of form and thought of his favourite Greeks. It may be said that Shakspere was equally unlike the Greeks, and yet Milton admired him. True; but Shakspere was transcendent, and triumphed over any prejudice.

· 1. 102. buskined stage: the stage of tragedy. The buskin was the cothurnus or high-heeled shoe which was worn by tragic actors of antiquity.

1. 103. The dreamer goes on to wish that Melancholy could evoke the lost verses of Musaeus, or the fabled strains of Orpheus, or the story that Chaucer 'left half-told.'

1. 109. The story of Orpheus and Eurydice is told at the end of Virgil's fourth Georgic.

The Squire's Tale of Chaucer was 'left half-told,' and the names come out of it.

1. 112. And who is elliptical for 'And of him who.'

1. 113. virtuous: with magic virtue or potency.

1. 116. Spenser, Tasso, Ariosto, all favourites of Milton, are perhaps meant.

ll. 119-120. Contrast the effect of D. G. Rossetti's somewhat similar lines in The Portrait:—

'A covert place
Where you might think to find a din
Of doubtful talk, and a live flame
Wandering, and many a shape whose name
Not itself knoweth, and old dew,
And your own footsteps meeting you,
And all things going as they came.'

ll. 121-5. The night-vision ends, and the dreamer walks abroad with Eos or the Morn: but she is not to come bright and gaudy with curled hair ('frounced,' see Glossary), as when she hunted with 'Attic' Cephalus, but soberly clad like a citizen ('civil-suited'); and her sedate headgear (l. 125) is to be a cloud.

1. 126. rocking is an active verb; the shrill winds rock the house.

1. 127. still is 'quiet,' untempestuous.

1. 130. The large drops falling from time to time from the eaves after a shower. Compare our 'minute-guns.'

l. 134. Mr. Ruskin (Mod. Painters, iii. 240 sq.) explains Dante's aer bruno as dark-grey, not our 'brown' or 'the colour of burnt umber.' Milton would probably have Dante in his mind, and would mean the same thing, namely grey.

Sylvan is Sylvanus, the wood-deity.

1. 135. monumental means here 'memorial, secular, annosus,' and not, as Keightley thought, 'the oak which is used for carving monuments.' ('Nothing was more suitable to the Penseroso than to think of the most solemn use to which the oak could be put.')

1. 136. Tasso, Gerusalemme Liberata, canto xiii, copying Virgil and others, has an enchanted forest where wonderful things happen.

1. 141. garish: flaunting, gaudy. See Glossary.

l. 145. consort: harmony.

1. 148. his: sleep's. Of the spirit (Faerie Queene i. 1. 44) we read that 'And on his little wings a dream he bore.'

It has been suggested that Milton was here thinking of the old pictures of angels holding scrolls displayed against the background of their extended wings. The 'aery stream' is perhaps the scroll or figured pennon made of unsubstantial air which flutters over the dreamer, and at last, laid on his lids, lulls him to sleep. By the side of the lovely music of these lines read Marvell's wonderful treatment of the same metre in 'Thoughts in a Garden' and 'Song of the Emigrants in Bermuda' (Palgrave's Golden Treasury, pieces III and II4, the Allegro and the Penseroso being with fine appreciation inserted between).

1. 156. studious cloister suggests at first blush the cloister of a college: but Milton may have meant the epithet generally, and have been thinking (as the sequel seems to show) of a cathedral.

pale: enclosure. Older editors read 'cloisters pale,' taking 'pale' as an adjective: but it would be a rather strange one.

l. 157. embowed: arched.

1. 158. massy-proof, probably a compound of two adjectives 'mas-

sive' and 'proof,' rather than 'proof against the mass above it,' 'proof against falling in.'

l. 159. storied: figured with scriptural legend. dight, see Glossary.

1. 161. Milton, who here bears witness to the solemn influences of the cathedral service, in his Eikonoklastes ridiculed the organs and the singing-men in the king's chapel: the Puritan in him crushed the child of light and roused the Philistine.

l. 167. The Penseroso's mind quits the images of his day's walk and his day-dream and flies to the end of his life.

#### GLOSSARY.\*

Bested, l. 3, help, avail. An old word of Scandinavian origin, and with parallels in mod. Danish and Swedish.

Buskin, l. 102, legging. Prof. Skeat thinks the word a corruption of O. Dutch borseken, a little purse. Hence the word would be connected with purse, and goes back through French and Latin to  $\beta \acute{\nu} \rho \sigma \eta$ , a hide. But Dr. Murray doubts this explanation and believes the etymology unknown.

Civil-suited, 1. 122, sober-suited like a citizen.

Consent, l. 95, harmony, agreement. See note.

Consort, l. 145. Here equivalent to 'concert,' musical harmony: and confused with it, though the words are distinct in origin (concert being from conserere, consort from consors).

Curfew, l. 74. O.F. couvre-feu, fire-cover, the time for covering fires: the bell rung every evening to denote that time.

Cypress lawn, l. 35 (spelt cipres by Milton), is the same as crape (Lat. crispus), but is etymologically of different and unknown origin: it has probably nothing to do with the tree of the same name. Autolycus vends 'cypress black as e'er was crow' (Winter's Tale, iv. 4. 221).

\* Mainly compiled from Professor Skeat's Etymological Dictionary, and the New English Dictionary.

- Demure, l. 32. The sense here is the good old one of 'modest,' with no implication of slyness, as is seen from the derivation—O.F. de murs, that is de bons murs (= maurs).
- Dight, l. 159, adorned, short for dighted. M.E. dihten, A.S. dihtan, to arrange.
- Frounced, l. 123, is the old form of *flounced*, and comes from French *froncer*, to wrinkle, which perhaps goes back to Lat. *frons*. Here it means 'frizzled and bedizened.'
- Garish, l. 141, flaunting, staring, gaudy. The old verb to gare (=stare) is a variant of M.E. gasen, to gaze.
- Grain, l. 33, colour. The original meaning of the texture became transferred to the hue with which it was dyed. This was usually red or crimson (cochineal, coccus) which were fast colours. Hence 'darkest grain' probably means dark purple. 'From distinct red or crimson, however, the word grain seems to have been extended to include all fast or durable colours of a red or purple order, if not other colours.' (Masson on P. L. v. 285.)
- Hist, l. 55, originally=hush! In this place Keightley takes it as an imperative: '(let the mute silence) come stealing along and crying 'hist!' Prof. Skeat has a more difficult interpretation; he takes it as a past participle, and makes *silence* governed by *bring* of l. 51:—'bring along with thee the mute hushed silence!'
- Kercheft, l. 125, with the head swathed. A kerchief is literally a head-cover, (M.E. couerchef, O.F. covrir, cover; and chef, caput).
- Pall, l. 97, long cloak. A.S. pall, purple cloth, Lat. palla.
- State, 1. 37, rank, dignity. For 'to keep state,' see note.
- Stole, 1. 35, is properly the long robe or scarf of a priest (L. stola, Gk. στολή), but here it seems to mean rather a veil or hood.
- Toys, l. 4, trivialities. The word comes from Dutch tuig, trifle, and has cognate words in Scandinavian and German (zeug, lumber: spielzeug, toys).
- Turneys, 1. 18, tourneys, tournaments, sham fights. O.F. tornoi, lit. a turning about.
- Virtuous, l. 113, with magic efficacy or 'virtue.' So the 'virtuous steele,' F. Q. ii. 8. 22.



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